

“Iyer Yattanar Karanam” – Its Significance in the Ancient Tamil literature.

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Introduction: “*Iyer Yattanar Karanam*” (ஐயர் யாத்தனர் கரணம் என்ப), this expression appears in Tolkappiyam, the ancient extant Tamil work on grammar, but, it also deals with the important aspects of Tamil society including the economic aspects that had impact on the society. Perhaps, no other Sutra would have created so much controversy and interpretation than this because of the expression used “Iyer”. In modern connotation, it refers to people of “Brahmin” community. The simple translation of it in English is, “Iyer Introduced the Sacrament”. However, the debate was and perhaps is about the identification of “Iyer” and therefore, the meaning of “Iyer” has to be analyzed in the context. Actually, this – the sutra, is about the introduction of the Sacrament of Marriage in the ancient Tamil society.

The United life of Men and Women: In ancient times, men and women liked and loved each other during their course of many interactions and began to live together, running family life. Though, there was no sacrament of marriage as such in those days, mind was definitely the uniting factor, when the minds of men and women unite together, that is the greatest sacrament of all ages in any society. Perhaps, in the same way, men and women after attaining proper age started living together, the moment they understood each other and their minds united. The practice was prevalent among the peoples of civilizations of the ancient world. But because of moral degradation and breakage of united life, there were social problems cropping up. To avoid such problems, the heads of the respective societies started the sacrament of marriage, so that the men and women who entered into such wedlock would lead a happy life. Tolkappiyar, the author of Tolkappiyam mentions such a practice prevalent in the ancient Tamil society.

Interpretation of the Sutra: In Tolkappiyam, the verse in Porulathikaram (a Chapter on Material life”), Karpiyal Suttiram (A Code on Chastity) declares –

“Poyyum vazhuvum tonriy pinnar
Iyer yattanar karanam enba”

பொய்யும் வழுவும் தோன்றிய பின்னர்
ஐயர் யாத்தனர் கரணம் என்ப

The plain meaning is –

“After the appearance of indiscipline and immorality,
Iyer introduced the Sacrament”

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In ancient times, men and women of Tamizhagam loved each other before their starting of family life, as husband and wife. But during the course of time, as there were some sociological problems among such couples, breaking away of men-women bond, man having more than one woman, breaking away of family, children and property issues, and other connected issues, “Iyer” had to introduce the practice of Sacrament of marriage among the members of the Tamil society. To understand the actual position, the meaning of “Iyer” has to be analyzed here. The word “Iyer” is found in the ancient Tamil literature as follows:

Tamil work	Where mentioned
Tolkappiyam – தொல்காப்பியம்	III-143-2, 144-29
Tirumurugatruppada – திருமுருகாற்றுப்படை	107
Kurinchippattu – குறிஞ்சிப்பாட்டு	17
Natrinai – நற்றிணை	122-1, 127-5
Kuruntogai – குறுந்தொகை	272-4
Ingurunuru – ஐங்குறுநூறு	365-1
Paditruppattu – பதிற்றுப் பத்து	70-19
Paripadal Tirattu – பரிபாடல் திரட்டு	2-63
Kalittogai – கலித்தொகை	39-17, 21, 130-9
Agananuru – அகநானூறு	226-7, 259-16, 302-9
Purananuru – புறநானூறு	337-16, 350-8
Tinaimalai Nutraimbathu – தினைமாலை நூற்றைம்பது.	22-2
Cilappadhikaram – சிலப்பதிகாரம்	7-17-1, 7-19-1, 10-160, 12-14-1, 12-15-1, 12-10-1
Kalaviyal – களவியல்	28-1

And the various meanings derived according to the relevant context are Lord Shiva, Teacher, Preceptor, Priest, Andanar (Brahmin), Superior, Master or King and it has been used with such adoration and veneration as could be noted. Therefore, it can be said that “Iyer” denoting the above connotation, perhaps, with the exception of Lord Shiva introduced the practice of sacrament of marriage in the Tamizhagam.

Implied two interpretations: The supporters of the hypotheses and theories of “the Aryanization of Dravidians”, here surprisingly have taken two different stands about Tolkappiya Sutra, though they have not denied about the introduction of such a practice among Tamils, when man-woman relations reached an immoral condition. One group interprets that “Iyer” denotes Brahmin, Arya, Rishi, and Munivar. In short, they argue that Aryans introduced the sacrament of marriage among Dravidians when the man-woman relationships of Dravidians deteriorated, with the implication that, perhaps, Dravidians did not about the sacrament of marriage. To counter this interpretation, the other group of scholars retort, “Did not Tamil people know to live married life, who were leading civilized life even before the invading Aryans?”

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Let us analyze the first interpretation. Nachininarkiniyar of 15th century points out that “Iyer” of the Sutra in questions refers to “Irudigal” i.e, Rishis, implying ‘Arya Rishis’.

M. Raghava Iyengar opines that “Iyer” denotes ‘Arya’ i.e, Arya Brahmin¹.

P. S. Subramanya Sastri indicates that this (Code of Chastity) was taught by Aryans to non-Aryans. It (Karpū system) was introduced by Aryans to those other than they². Further, he adds that they say that Karanam was introduced by Aryas after the lovers began to prove false and ladies were considered unworthy.

In another work, he notes that “Aiyer is the ‘tadbava’ (another form) of Arya. Though Aiyer generally refers to Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya, yet it may refer here only to Brahmin alone since Brahmin alone is said to have gone to south from north³.

K. A. Nilakanda Sastri infers that the Tolkappiyar stated definitely that marriage as a sacrament attended with ritual was established in the Tamil country by the Aryas⁴.

These scholars have interpreted that “Iyer” mentioned in Tolkappiyam denoted rishis, Brahmins and Aryans.

Coming to the second interpretation, it is said that the word “Iyer” was started to be used denoting Brahmins only in recent times. From the period of Vijayanagara empire (15th century) the word had been used to denote them. Before that, it was not used to denote Brahmins and there was no inscription also to that effect. “I”, “Iyyan”, “Iyer” – these words were used in Sangam literature to denote elder brother, father, elderly person in general to king and belonging to king’s clan in particular. And moreover, as the Tamils were having highest civilized society, there was no need for them to be taught about the sacrament of marriage by the Aryans. As the word “Iyer” also denotes king or members of royal family, only they had introduced the “Karanam” and not “Aryans”.

Considering the above interpretations, it is clear that the sacrament of marriage was not among the Tamils though they were highly civilized, as has been considered by the later group of scholars. In any civilization, in the process of evolution of social institution and connected establishments, without any code of conduct in family, society cannot be claimed to attain the civilized state. So it is intriguing that in a civilized Tamil society why the sacrament of marriage was introduced only after the appearance of indiscipline and immorality among them.

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“Iyer” could be “Brahmin”? Though the word “Brahmin” as such does not appear in the Tamil literature, they have been called and represented by various nomenclatures depending upon the nature of duties performed¹. They are –

1. Parppar - பார்ப்பர்	11. Aravor - அறவோர்	21. Iru pirappalar – இரு பிறப்பாளர்
2. Arutozhilalar - அறுதொழிலாளர்	12. Andanar – அந்தணர்	22. Vedhiyar - வேதியர்
3. Eri valarppor – எரி வளர்ப்போர்	13. Adi Varunar – ஆதி வருணர்	23. Vippirar - விப்பிரர்
4. Veliviyalar - வேள்வியாளர்	14. Maraiyor – மறையோர்	24. Iyer - ஐயர்
5. Merkulattor - மேற்குலத்தோர்	15. Murkulattor – முற்குலத்தோர்	25. Tozhukular - தொழுகுலர்
6. Vedaparakar – வேதபாரகர்	16. Muppirinulor – முப்புரி நூலோர்	26. Vedakodiyar- வேதக்கொடியோர்
7. Muttimarabinar – முத்தீமரபினர்	17. Kamalattarinar - கமலத்தாரினர்	27. Samittinar - சமித்தினர்
8. Taruppaiyar – தருப்பையர்	18. Munjiyar - முஞ்சியர்	28. Munivar – முனிவர்
9. Aynthor – ஆய்ந்தோர்	19. Meyyar – மெய்யர்	29. Sigaivar – சிகைவர்
10. Uyarthor - உயர்ந்தோர்	20. Pusurar - பூசுரர்	30. Araiya - அரையர்

Incidentally, it can be noted that these expressions were attributed to them, only based on the work they do, perform or mandated to do so. Therefore, a question arises as to whether only “Brahmins” were destined and mandated to perform such duties, ender services and vsrry out such work or anybody could do. These names and expressions had been so popular and in usage that the compilers of Nigandus (Thesarus) have included them in their works dated to 9th to 12th centuries.

What Literature says about Marriage and marriage performing persons: Besides the different word used, there are copious description about their way of life, duties and their association with the society in Ettuttogai,

¹ During the period of Nigandu c.9th -12th centuries, the names of various people groups had been compiled and the are added in the list.

அறவோர் பூசுர ரறு தொழி லாள
ரிருபிறப் பாள ரெரிவளர்ப் போரே
யாதி வருணர் வேதிய ரந்தணர்
வேள்வியாளர் மறையவர் விப்பிரர்
மேற்குலத் தோர்முற் குலத்தோ ரையர்
வேத பாரகர் முப்புரி நூலோர்
தொழுகுலர் பார்ப்பார் தொல் பெய ராகும்.
(பிங்கலந்தை : 726)

அய்யர், வேதியர், இருபிறப்பாளர்,
மெய்யர், மிக்கவர், இறையோர், பூசுரர்,
அந்தணர், நூலோர், அறுதொழிலாளர்,
செந்தீ வளர்ப்போர், உயர்ந்தோர், ஆய்ந்தோர்,
ஆதி வருணர், வேத பாரகர்,
வேள்வியாளர், விப்பிரர், தொழுகுலத்தோர்
முப்புரி நூலோர், முனிவர், என்று இவை
தப்பு இல் பார்ப்பார் தம் பெயர் ஆகும். (திவா : 167)

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Pattuppattu and Padinkizhkanakku. In Cilappadhikaram, one finds the marriage of Kovalan and Kannagi having been performed by Vedyar with chanting of mantras and the couple going around the sacred fire but only conspicuous absence of tying Tali (Mangala sutra). Later, the practice of tying Tali was incorporated in the Tamil Marriage and formed part and parcel of Tamil tradition, culture and civilization. Therefore, now a question arises as to how and when the practice of tying Tali (Mangala sutra) was introduced in the Tamil society. Was it after the introduction of 'Karanam' by 'Iyer' as has been mentioned by Tolkappiyar or even after Cilappathikaram period? Early Tamil women were represented as the embodiment of five chaste qualities:

Quality (in Tamil)	Simple translation	Explanation	
Acham	Fear	Fear of their association with men so that their name would be dragged unnecessarily	This does not mean Tamil women did not have any freedom or they were controlled thus. These qualities or attributes were thought of or prescribed as Utopian model. All women were expected to have such traits. Mainly poets exploited such characters
Madam	Ignorance	She would not care about other or strange man on any account	
Nanam	Shyness	She would shy about thinking of other or strange man on any account	
Payirppu	Aversion	She would dislike anything belonging to males	
Karpu	Chastity	Thus, she protects and preserves her chastity known as "Karpu"	

These are psychological or internal controls of unmarried women. Tali, Kumkum on the forehead, Netti, Silambu etc., are the ornaments used to identify the status of women as to whether they were married or not.

The evolution of sacrament of marriage and connected rituals could not have developed immediately at once or all of sudden. Naturally, because of the deterioration of united life of mem-women and the appearance of indiscipline and immorality, the moral, binding and symbolic rituals (both external and internal) would have been added and introduced, according to the necessity arisen in specific conditions. But at any case, whether the Sacrament of Marriage was introduced by "Iyer", taking the meaning of King or member of royal family or Aryans (Munivar or Rishis), it cannot be denied that the immediate and consequent rites and rituals connected with sacrament of marriage were conducted by the Brahmins, who were called by different nomenclature as pointed out above.

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The different words of “Iyer” in Inscriptions: As already pointed out, “I”, “Iyya”, “Iyan”, “Iyer” words used in the Sangam / Tamil literature to denote elder brother, father, priest, elderly person in general, Iyer, Aya words were used in other languages Sanskrit, Prakrit (Pali), Telegu, Kannada, Sinhala to denote persons occupying higher or respectable positions.

There was a Tamil poet, “Iyyan Aridhanar”, belonging to last Sangam period and author of “Purapporul Venba Malai”. As he belonged to Chera line of royal family, “Iyyan” was attributed to him. The Copper plate grants issued by a Chera king Sthanu Ravi indicates the members of royal family were mentioned as “Iyyan Adigal” 5.

“Iyyadigal Kadavarkon” was one of the Saiva Nayanmars. ‘Kadavarkon’ indicates that he belonged to Pallava royal family. “I” may denote “Iyer” according to some scholars. But “I” in his name denotes God (Lord Shiva) also. ‘Kon’ itself means ‘king’. Therefore, there need not be one prefix “I” and another suffix ‘kon’ giving the same meaning. Therefore, his names suggests that ‘The King of Pallava family is a devotee of Shiva’, thus, appropriately grouped as one of the Nayanmars. He was ruling Kanchipuram in the 6th century.

The Kings of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) were also attributed with the word “Aya” denoting “Iyyan” A King named “Thambi Udhiyan” who ruled Kalali part of Ceylon was known as “Iyyan” 6.

Buddha Bikku / Bhikshu were living in the caves of Sri Lanka at places known as “Raja Kala” and “Rasa Hala” in c. 2 BCE. Two sons of a King Satta Thissan issued grants to the Buddha bikkus. An inscription which explains this grant mentioning the sons of Kings as “Maha Aya” and “Thissa Aya” to denote elder prince and the other own name Thissa.

The combination of ‘Aya’ occurs in the inscriptions – ‘Ayama’ in a Junar inscription and Ayasiri (names of ladies royal family) in Nagarjunakonda inscription. “Aja” is another form of Prakrit Ayya, Sanskrit Arya and Tamil Ayya, Iyya, Ayyar, Iyer and Ariyar pronounced differently and it is found in the Mayidavolu and Mattapad grants.

However, “Ilampurana Adigal, another commentator of Tolkappiyam interprets –

“When falsehood and immoral relationships appeared,
it is said that “Munivar” introduced Karanam”

Here, he gives the meaning “Munivar” for “Iyer” denoting leading personality, president or head of people.

Conclusion: The Caldwell’s racial interpretation of linguistics led to the Dravidian movement and its outcome of social and political actions and interactions resulted in many changes in the Tamilnadu during late 19th and early

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20th centuries. Even the priest performed marriages were abandoned by the “Self-Respect” groups, later to be legalized by an amendment to the Hindu Marriage Act to avoid similar controversy as started by Tolkappiyar.

The men and women who got married under “Suyamariyadhai or Seerthiruttha” forms⁹ and their children were in dilemma as their marriages were held null and void as per the Section 7 of the Hindu Marriage Act, 1995. In fact, many married again ever “marriage” and even begetting children to get legal status. Thus, the Tamilnadu Act XXI of 1967 was introduced to amend the Hindu Marriage Act, 1995 by inserting Section 7A, which allows (or rather legalized) the “Suyamariyadhai or Seerthiruttha” forms of marriages performed or solemnized¹⁰. Even in such marriages, a mere tying of Tali in presence of friends, and relations’ amount to a valid marriage as per the amendment Act¹¹.

Thus, it is also similar to Tolkappiyar¹², but only the difference is the way in which the bondage is tied or untied with or without rituals. Therefore, this type of issues has to be dealt with carefully, as it involves a lot of implications affecting the society. Therefore, when Tolkappiyar recorded that the Sacrament of Marriage was introduced in the Tamil society under a particular exigency, it has to be conceived, understood and analyzed accordingly without importing any latter-day ideologies.

Based on the above discussion, the following conclusions may be drawn:

1. As per Tolkappiyar, definitely after the appearance of falsehood and immorality, the Sacrament of Marriage was introduced in the Tamil society.
2. That there were two forms of union of men and women – Kalavu and Karpu prove such possibility.
3. Only the identification of “Iyer” leads to controversy, definitely based on the “Aryan-Dravidian” racial interpretations and connotations.
4. If the racial connotation, understanding and interpretation is set aside or kept aside without any bias or prejudice, it may be safely concluded that “Iyer” denoting the priest, who performs the marriage rituals was meant for the purpose.
5. Social processes cannot be interpreted with racial prejudice or hatred towards any particular community in historical perspective.

Notes and References

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1. M. Raghava Iyengar, Tamil Studies,
2. P. S. Subramania Sastri, An Enquiry into the Relationship of Sanskrit and Tamil, University of Travancore, 1946.
3., Tolkappiyam (Porul Adhikaram), Kuppusamy Sastry Research Institute, Madras, 1949, p.93.
4. K. A. Nilakanta Sastry, A History of South India, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.130.
5. Treavancore Archaeological Series, Vol.II, p.61.
6. Mahavamsa. XXII, Vol.II, p.82.
Epigraphica Zeylanica, Vol.VII.
7. Archaeological Survey of Western Indkia, Vol.IV, No.18, p.103.
8. K. A. Nilakanta Sastry, Journal of Oriental Research, Vol.IX, pp.13, 96.
9. It was a non-religious mode of performing marriages introduced by Periyar in late 1920s. Thousands of such marriages conducted due to the influence of the principles of Self-respect. Periyar was happy when the DMK regime renamed Madras State as Tamil Nadu and made Self-respect marriages legal.
10. See the official document inttroducing the bill in the Tamilnady Assembly – http://www.assembly.tn.gov.in/Documents/Resumes/04assly/04_01_2.pdf
11. The following is a comment appearing in “Frontline” magazine – <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2108/stories/20040423007701500.htm>

The Dravidian Movement has, in the past, sought the implementation of its policies and programmes through struggles and legislative measures by the State government. Many laws were enacted even during the early years of DMK rule, including the Hindu Marriages (Madras Amendment) Act, 1967 which legalised ritual-less weddings, the law that provides for reservation in employment and in educational institutions for backward classes, the legislation providing reservation for women in government jobs, and a law providing for property rights to women. Some laws concerning reservation and the appointment of non-Brahmins as temple priests could not survive judicial scrutiny. Attempts made by Dravidian parties to get the Constitution amended in order to circumvent court rulings on these two issues have not succeeded. There has not been any genuine effort by these parties to mobilise people's support to get the necessary amendments passed. Sections of the old guard in the movement wonder whether prolonged stay in power has blunted their fighting spirit.

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12. For the appearance of Poy and Vazhu after the introduction of the the Hindu Marriage (Madras Amendment Act), 1967, see the following –

<http://www.hinduonnet.com/2001/09/05/stories/0205000v.htm>